

Pricing Your Artwork By Judith Trager

For the past thirty years, I have been actively involved in the quilt world, both as an artist and as a business professional. Since 1990, I have sold 215 art quilts. These quilts have gone to public buildings, corporate headquarters, private homes, health care facilities, universities, and churches. I have built my own studio and remodeled my kitchen with money earned by my quilting. The business of fiber art has enabled me to have a good life doing what I have passion for and get paid for it.

In 1988, we moved to Boulder, Colorado, where I began to make art quilts full time. I began to produce one-of-a-kind pieces. Early on, I learned a valuable lesson that has come back to me time and time again: *Art has no fixed value.*

We are not dealing with a commodity. We are dealing with something that is governed by fashion, taste, perception, and emotion. We are dealing with trends, sometimes driven by powerful factors we don't understand. We are trying to muddle through a confusing labyrinth of value, worth, and self-confidence.

Do you *really* want to sell your art? What are your expectations? Are they high? Do you need money to support yourself and your family, or are you doing this just for extra cash? Does selling your artwork help you to be a more valuable member of the profession?

In 1996, I completed a quilt and mixed media series called *Plastic Flowers in a Mexican Graveyard*. It was colorful, topical, beautiful, complex, and humorous, and I was *very* pleased with it. It was autobiographical, journaling my life as a child and teenager living in Mexico and my observations of the Mexican-American culture surrounding me in my southwest home.

The gallery that represents me, Victoria Boyce Gallery in Scottsdale, loved the artwork and scheduled me for a one-woman show at the height of the tourist season. We had a great opening with about 300 people attending—wine, food, the whole thing, including mariachis. During the whole run of the show, we didn't sell a piece. Not one. What was wrong? Was the artwork bad? Overpriced? The answers were that nothing was wrong, the artwork was good, but the artwork was underpriced.

The artwork eventually sold over a period of time, and much of it was shown in important venues. A Santa Fe collector bought four pieces. The centerpiece of the show sold to someone in Scottsdale through the gallery six years later. Did I initially feel rejected? You bet. But was it the end of my career? No way.

Back to you and what you need to do to get there. We're talking about business. Once you're in business, your quilts need to be truly professional: finished, ready to hang, photographed—completely ready to go. Can you meet the demand you create? Have you figured out a way to professionally present yourself and your art?

While you are mulling over these questions, let's ponder the types of sales you might have. There are the obvious avenues, sales to friends and family, which are often the easiest and

account for the most repeat sales. Then there are other private placements to collectors and people who have seen your artwork somewhere. Here is where the Internet becomes important, and a professional web site becomes a necessity. I've sold art off my web site to people I've never met. These have been easy sales. The web site has been an effective and valuable tool.

Other categories of sales include corporate placements, often through art consultants; specialized clients such as health care; sales through galleries and museum gift shops; exhibition sales; catalogs, such as *American Art Collector*; online sales through sites like artistsregister.com; and shows, such as the Smithsonian Craft Fair. I personally do an open studio two weekends a year (along with 143 other Boulder, Colorado, artists) where more than 500 people traipse through my home and studio. The open studio accounts for a quarter to a third of my income each year.

Now that you know where you can sell, and you have your quilts professionally ready to sell, how do you price them? Well...we need to go back to the first big lesson: *Art has no fixed value*. But there are ways you can ascribe value—competitive value—to your artwork. Remember always that you will be competing with your friends, colleagues, and even with the Nancy Crows of the world for the meager art budgets of the average art buyer. And, importantly, art buyers are fickle. They are being courted not only by other art quilters, but by painters, weavers, sculptors, ceramicists, jewelers, collage artists, etc. Don't despair. Through careful research, planning, hard work, and pricing, you can compete.

Here's some of the research you need to conduct in getting ready to competitively price your quilts: How long have you been in the business? How many quilts have you sold? Do you have a record of your sales? Can you chart what sold for how much and why? Where are you in your career—emerging artist, mid-career artist, or mature artist? Where have your quilts been shown? Have you built your resumé? Has your artwork received prizes such as those given at Quilt Festival or the like? Have you been in important exhibitions nationally and internationally (ones that attract the attention of both the art-buying public and the press)? Unfortunately, local shows at small venues don't carry the same importance as big ones like *ArtQuilts at the Sedgwick*. Has your work been reviewed by national or local media? Have your quilts been invited to be shown in museums?

Now to the nitty gritty. The easiest way to price your quilts, and probably the best for beginners, is by the square foot. This is simple and you can have one square foot price for larger quilts and another square foot price for smaller quilts since they can actually sell at a higher square foot price. Begin somewhere near \$50 to \$75 a square foot for large quilts and \$100 to \$125 for small quilts. This gives you a baseline from which to work. The hardest way to price your quilts is factoring in how long it took you to make the quilt by ascribing an hourly rate to your work. That rate includes design time, sewing time, cutting time, finishing time, etc., and adds in the criteria just mentioned about number of quilts sold, place in career, shows, etc. Remember, quilts take more time to make than paintings but are often less valued by the buying public.

Now, take into consideration regional differences. Quilts can often sell for megabucks in places like New York City and Santa Fe, but for bitty bucks in Saginaw or Billings. Do some research and comparison shopping. Go to exhibitions and galleries and compare other artwork to your

own. See what your regional median price is and how your artwork fits in. Don't look at quilts that don't have those little red dots on the tags. These quilts are *not* sold.

Talk to other artists about how they price. Once a year, my critique group, The Piecemakers, talks about how we price our quilts. We ponder why some pieces sold and what went wrong when some didn't. We come up with interesting revelations—mainly that the more quilts you make, the more you sell.

I price my artwork using the following “spongy” criteria. I use a combination of square footage price, say \$300 per square foot retail, my record of exhibitions and sales, whether the quilt is an “important” quilt, having shown in *Quilt National* or published in the *Fiberarts Design Book*, whether it has been in the media spotlight, where it has traveled, the complexity, design, and whether the quilt is a “good” quilt or an “average” quilt according to my own personal standards. I price my artwork high enough to make sure it is competitive with other artists on my level, and high enough to make my artwork valuable, not only to others, but to myself.

Now, I mentioned the word “retail.” I price all my quilts at retail. I do not have different prices for different clients. Even if it's my brother, I quote him the retail price. I will sell wholesale when I am working with galleries, museum shops, and art consultants. Wholesale price can be up to 50% less than the retail price. You can see where selling your artwork directly becomes an advantage. I also sometimes give discounts to non-profits, such as public hospitals. These discounts can be small, but sometimes make the difference between whether a sale is closed or not.

Does price matter? Yes. Definitely. But sometimes it matters in ways you don't expect. A couple of years ago I saw my sales lagging. I hadn't raised my prices for a long time and couldn't decide what was going on. Recession? 9/11? Not really. How was I to perk up my sales again? Mass mailings of postcards? New web page? Telephone calls to art consultants? Well, all that helped. But what I believe helped most was I increased my prices. I made my artwork more valuable by making it more expensive. My sales climbed and I began to feel my endeavor had a future. I have never looked back.

If you put a price on your artwork that makes it look like *art*, not something from a crafts show, buyers respect you more. If you value your artwork, so will they. And, because we live in America, and America is driven by the profit motive, price says it all. Back to Lesson One: *Art has no fixed value*. You need to figure out what the worth of your art is and make it work for you.

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